

ANOTHER MINIATURE PORTRAIT OF THOMAS SAY AND OTHER SAY NOTES

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When our biography of Thomas Say was published, we were somewhat of the opinion that certain sources of original material had been exhausted. We were led to believe that this was so because of our failure to find anything during the year previous to publication. However, no one has the privilege of saying the last word upon anything—and we are glad to present the following information which has come to light since the book appeared.

Mr. Frederic Fairchild Sherman, of New York City, very kindly called our attention to a miniature portrait of Thomas Say, which was painted by M. Binsse de Saint-Victor, maternal grandfather of John LaFarge, and furnished the photograph which accompanies these notes. It shows Say in the years of his youth and is, according to Mr. Sherman, "a beautifully painted ivory."

M. Binsse de Saint-Victor, formerly a planter in San Domingo, came to this country in 1806, a refugee from San Domingo, and landed in Philadelphia. Later, New York City was his residence. According to "John LaFarge, a Memoir and a Study" by Royal Cortissoz (Boston, 1911), John LaFarge, who clearly remembered his grandfather, is quoted as follows:

"He happened to have somewhat of an artistic temperament—it was in the family; and he was as gentle and amiable as his more celebrated brother, the father of Paul de Saint-Victor, was not. My grandfather took to painting miniatures and giving drawing lessons and learned his art as he went along. I dare say some of his miniatures may still exist. On a small scale he was an exquisite painter. He was also a good teacher and started me at six years old in the traditions of the eighteenth century."

On page 229 of "Thomas Say, Early American Naturalist" (Springfield, 1931), reference is made to the portrait of Thomas

Say most commonly used in connection with accounts of his life—a steel engraving by Meyer from a portrait by Joseph Wood—and the statement is made that the original does not appear to exist. On March 13, 1931, Miss Helen Juliet Kobbé, of 70 East 96th Street, New York City, wrote that the original, “a small oil-painting on wood, measuring $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $6\frac{3}{4}$ inches,” was in her possession. Miss Kobbé said, “I am glad to know who was supposed to be the artist. Mrs. Say’s youngest sister, Sarah Lord Kobbé, was my grandmother, and Mrs. Say lived next door to our family during those years on Staten Island, when as a young girl, I used to sit with her daily, and listen to her talk of her loved husband, and the interesting friends he had.

“The portrait in question hung in her room, and either at her departure for Milton she gave it to my father, her nephew, or it was sent him at her death. . . . I find the following inscription on the back of the portrait—‘Portrait of Mr. Say—painted either before his departure with Maj. Long, or just after his return from the Rocky Mountains—1819–20.’ . . . The colors are very dark, or dull from age.”

Another interesting item is Rafinesque’s criticism of Say’s “American Entomology.” This was published in the “American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review,” vol. II, no. 2, p. 143, 1817. This journal was founded by H. Biglow in May, 1817, in New York City, but existed only two years, 1817 and 1818. Rafinesque edited the department entitled “Museum of Natural Sciences” and was one of the notable contributors to the magazine. His review of Say’s work is quoted in full as follows:

“American Entomology or Descriptions of the Insects of North America, illustrated by coloured figures from drawings executed from nature, by Thomas Say, Philadelphia, Mitchell and Ames, 8vo first number pp. 40. with six plates and an engraved frontispiece.

“The United States can at last boast of having a learned and enlightened Entomologist in Mr. Say. Those who have preceded him, such as Catesby, Abbot, Melsheimer, Muhlenberg, Barton, Escher, Leconte, Torrey, &c. have merely been collectors, or painters, or nomenclators; but the author of this work shows

himself acquainted with the details and improvements of the science; he is at the same time an acute observer and an able painter. This increases our regret that instead of aiming at the glorious title of the American Fabricius, his utmost ambition is to tread in the steps of Donovan! and imitate his uncouth arrangements, desultory style, pompous publications, and costly performances. We regret exceedingly to see those defective modes introduced by the author of this work, and are sorry to foresee that they are not likely to promote his views. This was not the manner in which the labours of Linneus, Fabricius, and Latreille have been published, yet they are the classical authors of the science. It is true that we are offered an elegant specimen of typography; but the price of it is two dollars. For that sum we have forty pages (of which twelve are quite blank!) printed on beautiful paper and type, and six fine coloured plates, containing only eight species (whereof five are new) of insects, while they might have included sixty! Therefore at this rate, as there are at least eight thousand species of insects in North America, the sum of two thousand dollars will be requisite in order to admire the insects on this new plan! while on the plan of Linneus, &c. ten dollars might be quite sufficient. It would be well if this style was left for the use of the princes and lords of Europe. When this work shall proceed, we may endeavour to review it at length. C. S. R."